

**Understanding Ignatius: The Formative Years of the First Jesuit**

Joseph Patterson

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Colorado College Department of History  
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*Introduction*

On March 13, 2013, at the Vatican, a billowing column of white smoke rose from the chimney of the Sistine Chapel. With the words *Habemus papam*, church officials announced the name of the new leader of the Catholic Church. The papal conclave elected a respected cardinal from Argentina named Jorge Bergoglio to the sacred position, and Bergoglio henceforth became Pope Francis. The announcement sent shockwaves through the religious world; Pope Francis' election was unprecedented for several reasons. He is the first Pope from South America, the first from outside of Europe since the year 741, and he is the first to select the papal name "Francis." While investigations into these two aspects of the distinctive pope would surely reveal rich and interesting backgrounds, a third unique characteristic of Pope Francis overshadows these extraordinary traits.

The most surprising fact about Bergoglio's papacy is that in the history of the Catholic Church, he is the first Jesuit pope. Jesuits are members of the Society of Jesus, a unique and massively influential order founded in 1540.<sup>1</sup> Under the unofficial banner *Ad majorem Dei gloriam*, the Society worked to promote the Christian faith and aid the

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 413.

progress of souls towards spiritual perfection.<sup>2</sup> The unprecedented event provides a fitting moment to look back in time into the history of Jesuits and the Society of Jesus.

However, the task is complicated. The history of the Jesuits from their founding to modern day is complicated by layers of remarkable figures, controversy, innovation, and struggle.

Historian A. Lynn Martin aptly characterizes this checkered history as ‘The Jesuit Mystique.’ Martin and many other scholars have noted how the Jesuits seem to have eluded complete and confident analysis. He says, “This Jesuit Mystique is difficult because it is buttressed by many myths, legends, clichés, banalities...regarding their activities.”<sup>3</sup> Noted scholar of the Jesuits John W. O’Malley echoes this sentiment, adding, “The polarities and paradoxes as found in the story of the Society of Jesus may simply be indications of the richness of the tradition and of a vibrant and responsive organization.”<sup>4</sup> Looking into the Society’s past through its members, activities, accomplishments and critics combats the myths and untangles the paradoxes to assemble a more satisfying depiction of the Jesuit’s tumultuous journey from the sixteenth century to the present.

A Jesuit pope in the spotlight presents the perfect opportunity to shed light on this subject. In this undertaking I can only hope to be as effective a communicator as the founder of the Jesuit order, Saint Ignatius himself. His writings follow a common formula, to “set forth a clear and attractive end to be achieved and then to develop the

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<sup>2</sup> John W. O’Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 18.

<sup>3</sup> A. Lynn Martin, “The Jesuit Mystique,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 4 (1973): 32.

<sup>4</sup> O’Malley, 21.

means to attain it.”<sup>5</sup> The following study does not aspire to be a singular linear historical narrative but a dynamic *mélange* of some of the lesser-known stories and facets of the Jesuit tradition, with the goal of addressing a variety of questions. Who is Ignatius of Loyola and what makes him such a unique figure in Christianity? What does his transformation teach us? Why does he matter, and why is it a big deal that Pope Francis is a Jesuit? To answer to these questions requires a hybrid approach, combining historiography, hagiography, and ecclesiastical history. The sources employed here include primary writings of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, correspondence of early Jesuits, modern journal articles from expert scholars, and several monographs. A synthesis of these sources breathes new life into the tangled scholarship on the earliest Jesuits, and exposes various unresolved elements of the Jesuit ‘mystique,’ beginning with the first Jesuit, Ignatius of Loyola.

#### *The Autobiography and the Background*

Inigo de Loyola was born in 1491 in Guipuzcoa, Spain, in the Basque region.<sup>6</sup> The basis for most of our knowledge of Ignatius’ life comes from his *Autobiography*. The account begins in 1521, with Ignatius wounded by a French cannonball in the battlefield.<sup>7</sup> During his long and painful recovery, the author asserts, he experienced a spiritual transformation and was inspired to dedicate himself to the service of the Catholic Church and to helping souls. The account follows Ignatius’ travels, his education, and his good deeds through the founding of the order. While it abounds with useful personal insights, as a tool for the historical record it is problematic for several reasons.

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<sup>5</sup> George E. Ganss, ed., *Ignatius of Loyola: Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 276.

<sup>6</sup> Ganss, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Ganss, 69.

First, the title *Autobiography* is somewhat of a misnomer; technically Ignatius' *Autobiography* is a biographical work, written by one of Ignatius' closest companions Luis Goncalves da Camara. Ignatius dictated his life story to da Camara in Rome in 1553 and 1554, and da Camara had yet another scribe record the facts of the story at a later time. In addition to the long lapses of time between dictation and transcription, "the text we possess had filtered through several minds and languages before it reached the written page."<sup>8</sup> Therefore we must ask the question whether or not these factors taint the viability of the *Autobiography*. In his preface da Camara says he strove "not to put down any words except those that I heard from the Father."<sup>9</sup> Da Camara's peers vouched for his honesty and sharp memory, and the facts of the *Autobiography* have been corroborated with other sources. However, when a story like this is being crafted, as critic O'Malley notes, "Retrospective distortion is inevitable."<sup>10</sup> One may argue that the *Autobiography* is written for a specific and special audience and utility. Da Camara says Ignatius' story must be recorded, "to tell us how the Lord had guided him from the beginning of his conversion, so that his explanation could serve us as a testament and paternal instruction."<sup>11</sup> The founder's experience could inspire young Jesuits and use his spiritual journey as a way to exemplify Jesuit values.

The *Autobiography* paints Ignatius as a revered, disciplined pilgrim and magnetic leader. His charisma alone was a major draw for potential members. Yet, as Paul Shore observes, "This close up view of a saint does not entirely humanize him, for there is

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<sup>8</sup> O'Malley, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Ganss, 67.

<sup>10</sup> O'Malley, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Ganss, 58.

much that remains mysterious or inexplicable.”<sup>12</sup> Why does the *Autobiography* only start in 1521, when Ignatius was a fully matured adult? The work offers sparse mention of his upbringing or family and we must consider whether or not this was an intentional omission. A survey of Ignatius’ background reveals some crucial details of his life and demonstrates the extreme extent of his transformation from soldier to saint.

Ignatius’ unethical manner as a young adult can be attributed to the nature of his background, in both his family and ethnicity. The Loyola name was synonymous with aggression and military service. Since the thirteenth century the family had been making a name for itself as warriors for hire.<sup>13</sup> W. W. Meissner writes, “The life of the Loyolas was a rich amalgam of deep religious tradition, sincere piety, burning passion and lust, fierce pride, and an attitude of aristocracy and nobility.”<sup>14</sup> Like his father and forefathers, Ignatius upheld fundamental Basque values of bravery, repute, and tenacity. These characteristics were a product of centuries of bloody battles to protect Basque autonomy against intruders like the Moors, and to preserve their unique cultural identity. Over time their reputation as an unconquerable people imbued in them a sense of arrogance. The *Autobiography* only offers a minimal insight into this reputation - “He was a man given to the vanities of the world, and what he enjoyed most was warlike sport, with a great and foolish desire to win fame.”<sup>15</sup> As Meissner puts it, “With this simple statement, Ignatius

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Shore, “Recent Studies in Jesuit History,” *Journal of Religious History* 31 (2007): 321.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Kurlansky, *The Basque History of the World* (New York: Walter & Company, 1999), 67.

<sup>14</sup> W.W. Meissner, *The Psychology of a Saint: Ignatius of Loyola* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 14.

<sup>15</sup> Ganss, 68.

the saint draws a veil over the face of Inigo de Loyola,” as if young Ignatius and Ignatius of the *Autobiography* are two separate men.<sup>16</sup>

In Ignatius, vanity seemed to be an especially prominent preoccupation. After his leg was badly broken in battle, it was reset unevenly, resulting in a protrusion of the bone. “He could not bear such a thing because he was set on a worldly career and thought that this would deform him; he asked the surgeons if it could be cut away.”<sup>17</sup> Worrying for his appearance, he insisted to undergo excruciating elective cosmetic surgery. “The deformity would not fit the image of a handsome soldier, especially when the fashion of the day, particularly the tight-fitting cavalier’s boots, would reveal the deformity so readily.”<sup>18</sup> Here we see Ignatius as vain and insecure, needing to fit in to the Basque social norms no matter what the cost. The “worldly” endeavors Ignatius once hoped to pursue were a far cry from clerical activity. “The very stamp of a man’s masculinity and repute lie in his sword as in his sexuality.”<sup>19</sup> Young Ignatius was taken with dreams of adventure, chivalry, and in keeping with Loyola family values, testosterone-fueled conquest.

In his teenage years, Ignatius had been sent from his home in the Loyola castle in Guipuzcoa to Castile, where he became a page in the service of Juan Velazquez de Cuellar, the treasurer of Castile. Life in Castilian court in the presence of the monarchs King Ferdinand and Queen Isabela was decadent and alluring. Ignatius had loved reading various tales of gallantry and romance, *Amadis* for example.<sup>20</sup> In Castile he became

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<sup>16</sup> Meissner, 37.

<sup>17</sup> Ganss, 69.

<sup>18</sup> Meissner, 45.

<sup>19</sup> Meissner, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Meissner, 22.

tangled in the lifestyle he once only dreamed of, and he fully embraced it. Business in Castile in the service of the royals was a major source of Basque power. The Loyola family fought in the service of the Castilian monarchy as early as 1331 under King Alfonso XII. In return the Loyolas were rewarded with land, wealth, and titles.<sup>21</sup> The Loyolas had no real allegiance to the monarchy or to the Castilian agenda; all that mattered to them was maintaining Basque autonomy. Having Ignatius in court was a way to maintain his family's influence in Castile. The son was a skilled social climber, using his charm to network amongst the wealthy aristocrats and to cultivate a lucrative reputation. "He learned to deal with the powerful and highly placed in both royal and ecclesiastical circles."<sup>22</sup> Here Ignatius learned how to navigate hierarchical structures that would prove useful to him in the future while promoting the growth of the Society of Jesus amongst the Catholic leaders of Europe.

Later in his stay in Castile the young Ignatius began spending time in the court of Germaine de Foix, Ferdinand's second wife. His sponsor Juan Velazquez de Cuellar was wed to the queen's lady in waiting. Here Ignatius was dazzled by the opulence and the "shallow hedonistic amusements" of her court.<sup>23</sup> During these formative years of his youth he was eager to gain experience with the opposite sex. Like his brothers, he was "rich, attractive, and strong...in a culture that placed high value on masculinity and sexual prowess."<sup>24</sup> He began a friendship with Catalina, the granddaughter of Ferdinand and Isabela, which soon became teenage lust.

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<sup>21</sup> Kurlansky, 67.

<sup>22</sup> Meissner, 19.

<sup>23</sup> Kurlansky, 71.

<sup>24</sup> Meissner, 14.

As Ignatius matured his womanizing became more than a habit. “His appetite for women seemed insatiable, and he was often violent and abusive to them, frequently brawling with other men over them.”<sup>25</sup> Indiscreet relations with women had seemed to become a tenet of his personality, yet after his near-death injury he made a prompt reversal into lifelong celibacy. Such drastic changes make Ignatius more difficult for historians to understand. It could be indicative of the intensity of his conversion experience, as if he became an entirely new man.

Several incidents prior to 1521 frame Ignatius’ early moral laxity. He once let another man be charged with a robbery that he had committed.<sup>26</sup> In 1515, he was put on trial for a violent crime connected to the corruption of the local parish and the death of the rector’s nephew.<sup>27</sup> The court record that details the nature of the crime was lost, but we do know that in his defense, Ignatius claimed clerical immunity. This was a blatant fabrication; he had no clerical qualification, just abused a church policy to evade justice.<sup>28</sup> Unlike the case of his sexual affairs, however, where his behavior came to a complete and utter stop after his spiritual experience, his violent urges would persist.

Ignatius’ *Autobiography* tells the story of an encounter in late February of 1522 with a Moor who doubted the story of the immaculate conception. Ignatius felt that he had “done wrong in allowing the Moor to say such things about Our Lady, and that he ought to sally forth in defense of her honor.”<sup>29</sup> Here we see a combination of piety with Ignatius’ signature brand of chivalric aggression in his need to protect the name of a lady,

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<sup>25</sup> Kurlansky, 71.

<sup>26</sup> Kurlansky, 71.

<sup>27</sup> Meissner, 23.

<sup>28</sup> Meissner, 24.

<sup>29</sup> Ganss, 74.

the Virgin Mary. “He felt inclined to go in search of the Moor and stab him with his dagger for what he had said.”<sup>30</sup> Meissner notes, “This reaction resembles that of a chivalrous knight who feels that he must fight to defend the honor of his queen.”<sup>31</sup> His antagonism towards the Moor could also be considered part of his Basque heritage, because the Moors had been enemies of the Basques for centuries. Ultimately Ignatius did not find the Moor and no harm was brought upon him, but in this story we see shades of young Ignatius. Where it seems some aspects of his nature, like his sexual prowess, disappeared, some things like his aggression remain. These traits were rooted in his Basque family tradition, and followed him selectively into spiritual life.

How did religion factor into Ignatius’ early life? Little evidence of his religious life prior to his conversion appears in the *Autobiography*. We do know that the Basque people are remembered by history as fervent Catholics, though it seems it is more in spirit than practice. In his youth Ignatius received rudimentary clerical training, and for a time he was poised for that career.<sup>32</sup> His older brother Pedro Lopez was the only Loyola son so enter the clergy and he became rector of the local church.<sup>33</sup> Ignatius however, was “too full of life and fire, of ideas of romance and gallantry, for a peaceful ecclesiastical position.”<sup>34</sup> The faith roused little interest in Ignatius; he was too preoccupied with worldly things and abandoned his religious education as soon as he could. Basque Catholicism was unique and intense, like the Basque people. Meissner says, “It was that peculiar brand of faith that would willingly shed blood in defense of religion and

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<sup>30</sup> Ganss, 74.

<sup>31</sup> Meissner, 62.

<sup>32</sup> Meissner, 18.

<sup>33</sup> Kurlansky, 68.

<sup>34</sup> Meissner, 18.

celebrate the victory with a night of unbridled lechery.”<sup>35</sup> Their Christian values went hand in hand with near constant transgressions. Kurlansky notes, “The Basques were not dependable Christians. They did not fight for Christianity; they fought for Basqueland.” The extent to which Basques embraced their faith is disputed.

In Ignatius’ early days three elements of regional identity influenced him: the tough Basque Loyolas, the professed Catholicism of his community, and the royal courts of Castile. Where did his allegiance lie? Of these three things, his religion was the lowest priority. He was a Catholic in name, but in practice he was far from pious. He disrespected the church by deceiving the courts with false claims of clerical immunity. He belonged to a wealthy family, yet records show accounts of criminal acts, not charitable ones. He was ignorant of spiritual training and abusive towards women. These things do not seem like the behavior of man destined to be a saint. Up until his injury and subsequent conversion in 1521, he was far more prone towards self-serving behavior.

Ignatius was never especially attached to his family since his mother died when he was very young.<sup>36</sup> He was cared for by a blacksmith’s wife, and his father was typically away. Although he had few close familial relationships, he never failed to uphold the machismo that was expected of him to uphold his family’s legacy. The Loyola name was powerful and Ignatius knew to use that to his advantage, especially after seeing what it had bought for his brothers. “To make their fortunes in the world...Juan Perez and Hernando needed little more than their name, a few florins, and a

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<sup>35</sup> Meissner, 16.

<sup>36</sup> Kurlansky, 68.

little daring.”<sup>37</sup> He enjoyed the fruits of this legacy and things came easily to him.

However, as time went on, Ignatius’ allegiance to his family dwindled.

The more time he spent in Castile, the more his kinship connections faded into obscurity. Historians attribute this transition to the influence of Juan Velazquez de Cuellar, the treasurer of Castile and Ignatius’ sponsor. “One can picture the young Loyola, recently deprived of father and home and shaken by the rapid changes in his life, being received by Velazquez with kindness and warmth.”<sup>38</sup> Velazquez is remembered as a gentle, magnanimous man and a charitable Christian. Under him, Ignatius witnessed religion in action; Velazquez founded a convent and a hospital for the poor.<sup>39</sup> This authentic Catholic was a father figure to the energetic and impressionable Ignatius. After 1521, we see far more of Velazquez in the saintly Ignatius than of his own father, Beltran.

### *The Conversion*

The cannonball injury from Pamplona in 1521 required several surgeries and a lengthy and arduous recovery. On more than one occasion Ignatius appeared to be close to death, and at one point the doctors predicted that he would perish overnight.<sup>40</sup> He lay in bed bored and frustrated that his immobility was hindering his adventuresome lifestyle, so he took to daydreaming. “He imagined what he would do in the service of a certain lady; the means he would take so he could go to the place where she lived; the quips – the

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<sup>37</sup> Meissner, 15.

<sup>38</sup> Meissner, 19.

<sup>39</sup> Meissner, 19.

<sup>40</sup> Ganss, 69.

words he would address to her; the feats of arms he would perform in her service.”<sup>41</sup> He asked to be given any books of fiction so that time might pass by more quickly. “But in that house none of those that he usually read could be found, so they gave him a life of Christ and a book of the lives of the saints.”<sup>42</sup> In these books Ignatius discovered the catalyst for his conversion.

It is interesting to consider whether or not this would have ever happened had his preferred genre of chivalric romance been available to him. Nonetheless, Ignatius’ interest in the lives of saints grew exponentially with each page he turned. Slowly but surely, the man who shunned his education and religious training transformed into a passionate student of spiritual literature. The *Autobiography* describes his experience:

For in reading the life of Our Lord and of the saints, he stopped to think, reasoning with himself, “What if I should do what St. Francis did, and what St. Dominic did?” Thus he pondered over many things that he found good, always proposing to himself what was difficult and burdensome; and as he so proposed, it seemed easy for him to accomplish it. But he did no more than argue within himself, saying, “St. Dominic did this, therefore I have to do it; St. Francis did this, therefore I have to do it.”<sup>43</sup>

Here Ignatius reveals several interesting facets of his conversion experience. First, this passage represents his first real act of introspection. He had always been a man of action, but since he was confined to his bed he had little more than his thoughts. He began an internal dialogue with the saints and in doing so he realized his past propensity towards sin and a burning need to do penance. The *Autobiography* text says, “When he was thinking of those things of the world...he found himself dry and dissatisfied. But

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<sup>41</sup> Ganss, 70.

<sup>42</sup> Ganss, 70.

<sup>43</sup> Ganss, 70.

when he thought of going to Jerusalem barefoot...and of practicing all the other rigors that he saw in the saints...he remained satisfied and joyful.”<sup>44</sup> Ignatius realized his dissatisfaction with his life. Inspired by his reading of the lives of saints, he put his mind to a course of self-improvement and penance.

Another interesting observation about Ignatius up to this point is that, even in his mid-twenties, he appears to have been highly impressionable. This interpretation is based on his interactions with the literature with which he comes in contact. In his early days he was an avid reader of romantic and chivalric fiction. He thus strove to emulate the values of those stories, whether it meant being a daring, glory-seeking soldier or a debonair courtier. Then, after being exposed to spiritual literature, he decided that he should emulate the holy lives of figures like St. Francis and St. Dominic. Ignatius underwent a rapid transformation of character prompted by different stories he read.

Meissner’s analysis of Ignatius’ conversion takes the form of a psychological profile. Meissner cites noted American psychologist and contemporary of Sigmund Freud, William James, who described the symptoms that preempt conversion experiences. Among them, “a sense of incompleteness and imperfections; brooding, depression, morbid introspection, and sense of sin.”<sup>45</sup> All of these characteristics seem to match Ignatius during his recovery. For Ignatius, this conversion culminated in an intense vision. “One night while he was awake he saw clearly an image of Our Lady with the holy Child Jesus.... It seemed to him that his spirit was rid of all the images that had been painted on it.”<sup>46</sup> The vision had a profound impact on Ignatius. “Thus from that hour until

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<sup>44</sup> Ganss, 71.

<sup>45</sup> Meissner, 48.

<sup>46</sup> Ganss, 71.

August '53 when this was written, he never gave the slightest consent to things of the flesh."<sup>47</sup>

Meissner's psychoanalytic view asserts that the "climactic experience of religious conversion is frequently accompanied by a long, arduous process that brings about a gradual restructuring of the individual's personality."<sup>48</sup> Ignatius began this process of transformation using St. Francis and St. Dominic as templates, setting forth to do as they did. His interests, values and priorities would change, but as we will see, there are some aspects of his personality that remain until his death.

At this point, however, we must investigate the motivation for Ignatius' plan to begin this new spiritual life. After his injury and the subsequent deformity, Ignatius was no longer suited for a life of militant exploits in image or ability. "That cannonball crushed not only the bones of his leg, but also his ideals, ambitions, and dreams of glory."<sup>49</sup> Unable to return to his previous career, bed-ridden Ignatius had to contemplate where he would go once his recovery was complete. In this way we might view Ignatius' experience as analogous to the modern notion of the mid-life crisis. While reading the lives of saints he was confronted with the sins of his past; this brought him to a very dark place. His reaction was to reinvent himself via spiritual conversion.

After he recovered from his injury and set his mind on a spiritual life, Ignatius would reject his own brother. His brother "begged him not to throw himself away; also, to consider what hopes had been placed in him by the people...all with the purpose of

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<sup>47</sup> Ganss, 71.

<sup>48</sup> Meissner, 55.

<sup>49</sup> Meissner, 55.

dissuading him from his good intention.”<sup>50</sup> It became apparent that the Loyolas were on different wavelengths; Ignatius’ brother remained a scion of Loyola familial values and the future saint himself was already committed to his pursuit of spiritual perfection. Soon after that meeting, Ignatius slipped away from under the watch of his brother and headed to Montserrat to begin a life on his own.

Ignatius began to plan a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. On his journey, “he thought he might enter the Carthusian house in Seville, without saying who he was, so that they would make little of him; and there never eat anything but plain vegetables.”<sup>51</sup> This passage from the *Autobiography* demonstrates two things. First, it speaks to how widely spread across Spain the Loyola name was known. More importantly, it demonstrates Ignatius’ desire to conceal his identity. After his conversion he decided to dedicate himself to a life of poverty; he wanted an earnest and pious life, far removed from the wealth and repute of his family name and the sins of his past.

Here we must question Ignatius’ motivations. Did he seek this new earnest life because of divine inspiration? Or was it subconsciously motivated by a disgust and guilt for his past sins and indulgences? He says, “He was left with such loathing for his whole past life and especially for things of the flesh.”<sup>52</sup> At this stage Ignatius’ effort at a life of poverty seems superficial, based on adopting habits like diet to blend in. This example is reminiscent of a previous episode when Ignatius was self-conscious of his leg deformity and how it would affect how he would be perceived.

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<sup>50</sup> Ganss, 73.

<sup>51</sup> Ganss, 72.

<sup>52</sup> Ganss, 71.

It had seemed that Ignatius dropped his family associations, but early in his journey he still let it be known that he was a Loyola. In Navarrete he remembered the noble connections he had, and he sought out the local duke, who owed him money. “The treasurer said he had no money; and the duke hearing this said there might be a lack for everything but no lacking for Loyola...because of the reputation he had earned in the past.”<sup>53</sup> Ignatius hid his noble heritage in circles where it embarrassed him, and embraced it when it could be used to his benefit. At this point in his spiritual pilgrimage, Ignatius was still a novice. He had not yet encountered the obstacles or education that would lead him to maturity. But Ignatius chose his holy path and he would stick to it. With time his spirituality and understanding would deepen, and with experience his philosophies and methods would earn recognition.

Before we continue down the path of Jesuit history, we should first look back and summarize the significance of Ignatius’ early life. In the short span of his young adulthood he underwent a dramatic transformation. Historians must question the extent of this transformation. First, what about him changes, and what remains the same? His sexual identity is amongst the first features of his persona to disappear entirely; he remained celibate for the remainder of his life. Another major change was his stance towards education. The pursuit of knowledge was neither a tradition nor an interest of the Loyola family. For Ignatius and all but one of his brothers, schooling was abandoned after they learned to read and write. Meissner writes, “Learning and education were never highly prized by the Loyolas. They were landowners and men of action who needed only

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<sup>53</sup> Ganss, 73.

such education as required by their status and nobility.”<sup>54</sup> In his early days education was just a veneer as part of his social status, but after his spiritual discovery, education became a personal quest and then later a cornerstone of the entire Jesuit mission. Ignatius wrote approximately seven thousand letters, making him one of the most prolific writers of the sixteenth century.<sup>55</sup> When we think of Saint Ignatius of Loyola today, education is usually the first thing to come to mind.

Ignatius’ interests and pursuits underwent drastic change after his conversion. The thing that appears to remain constant within Ignatius is his fierce determination. One might say that you can take the Loyola out of the Basque but you can’t take the Basque out of the Loyola. The road towards the founding of the Jesuit order was laden with challenges. Ignatius set forth on this path ready for battle, doing whatever it took to further his mission of furthering the glory of God. As a young Basque, he was essentially a mercenary fighting for his family and the Spanish crown in return for favors. After his conversion, he retained the same militant attitude as a spiritual mercenary in the service of God. His motivation changes from secular to spiritual glory and he asks for nothing in return, but his general modus operandi remains the same. Symbolically, this aspect of his transformation occurs at Montserrat at the statue of the Black Madonna, where he left his sword and from that point on carried a pilgrim’s staff.<sup>56</sup> Meissner writes, “The ideals of

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<sup>54</sup> Meissner, 15.

<sup>55</sup> Peter Kountz, “Ignatius of Loyola and a New Direction for the History of the Jesuits,” review of *The Psychology of a Saint: Ignatius of Loyola*, by W.W. Meissner, *The Catholic Historical Review*, July 1996: 470.

<sup>56</sup> O’Malley, 24.

conquest and glory had been transformed and sublimated and recast in a spiritual mold: the pilgrim saw himself as a warrior of God and of Christ.”<sup>57</sup>

Looking into Ignatius’ early life and comparing and contrasting his identities before and after his religious conversion uncovers a truly unique personal story. We see Ignatius in times of great strength and great fragility. While sometimes abrasive, he was always magnetic and had natural leadership qualities. The remarkably short time frame in which he experiences his revelations and transitions between secular to spiritual domains demonstrates his elevated level of adaptability. Adaptability to changing times and environments is a crucial Ignatian characteristic that becomes apparent during numerous later occasions.

### *The Spiritual Exercises*

We last left Ignatius at the Benedictine monastery at Montserrat, the site where he confessed all his sins and formally pledged himself to a life of spiritual work. In March of 1522 he left Montserrat to continue on his planned pilgrimage to Jerusalem.<sup>58</sup> He stopped at the small town of Manresa and what he had meant to be a few days stay turned into nearly a yearlong stay due to a plague outbreak in the region.<sup>59</sup> From his readings on the saints to his confessions at Montserrat, to his stay in Manresa, Ignatius had been in the practice of writing down his thoughts, prayers, and practices. Through documenting the winding path of his own spiritual journey, he came to realize how his experience might be able to help others. “Besides his seven hours of prayer, he busied himself helping in

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<sup>57</sup> Meissner, 98.

<sup>58</sup> Ganss, 76.

<sup>59</sup> O’Malley, 25.

spiritual matters certain souls who came there looking for him.”<sup>60</sup> In this small town, Ignatius was beginning to earn a reputation as a holy and selfless man. As people began to come to him for help, he started to develop teaching strategies drawing from his personal notes.

O’Malley claims that here in Manresa the seminal Jesuit work *Spiritual Exercises* took shape.<sup>61</sup> At this time is also when we begin to see shades of Ignatius as an educator. The *Autobiography* says, “God treated him at this time just as a schoolmaster treats a child whom he is teaching.”<sup>62</sup> Ignatius was receiving divine instruction from God, and in turn Ignatius was relaying his experience to those souls he could help. He was simultaneously a student and a teacher. Over the years his notes and practices became more and more developed and formalized, eventually becoming a fully realized book.

Meissner calls *Spiritual Exercises* one of the most influential works in Western civilization and summarizes its content as “a series of practical directives – methods of examining one’s conscience, engaging in prayer of various kinds, deliberating or making life choices, and meditating.”<sup>63</sup> It is more manual than literature, demonstrating Ignatius’ propensity towards action. In understanding the *Spiritual Exercises* today, we encounter a problem of translation. The *Spiritual Exercises* is a unique work because it is on one hand a sixteenth-century historical document and on the other hand a manual used by Jesuits in the modern day for things like study and retreat. These two uses have resulted in two different types of translation. The literal translation is more difficult to understand but more reputable as a scholarly historical source. The “teaching manual” translation was

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<sup>60</sup> Ganss, 79.

<sup>61</sup> O’Malley, 25.

<sup>62</sup> Ganss, 79.

<sup>63</sup> Meissner, 87.

made to be accessible to first-time readers in a way that expresses Ignatius' original aims without getting tangled in potentially confusing language resulting from literal translation. The version used for this study belongs more to the latter category. One editor of the work, George Ganss, laments the loss of some of Ignatius' style but insists this translation is more accessible.<sup>64</sup> The translator's approach of "functional equivalence" preserves the integrity of the content while simplifying the language and style; therefore this version is still perfectly suitable for our purposes.

The first week of the exercises begins with "Principle and Foundation." It says, "Human beings are created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by means of this to save their souls. The other things on the face of the earth are created for the human beings, to help them in working toward the end for which they are created."<sup>65</sup> In this opening line to the first section, Ignatius reveals the general framework of his brand of spirituality. Even in his early adulthood he was always led by an overarching agenda. Then it was to use his noble status to place him in the service of those more powerful in return for wealth and glory. Here the agenda is far simpler and has nothing to do with status. Any and every human being exists to serve one purpose: to serve God, the most powerful figure of all. In both frameworks Ignatius seems to have a strong perception of hierarchy. Before his spiritual conversion, he viewed his surroundings in terms of social status and material possessions. As a member of nobility he was an intermediary between the lower and middle classes and royalty. The order inferred from the *Spiritual Exercises* is unilateral and egalitarian. All human beings are placed on an equal plane and they all

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<sup>64</sup> Ganss, 118.

<sup>65</sup> Ganss, 130.

bear the same expectation to praise God and further his glory. All other things exist only to aid humans in this task.

When reflecting upon the materialistic predilections of Ignatius' past, particularly his time in the opulent courts of Castile, this notion strikes an interesting contrast. Ignatius used to subscribe to the philosophy that to amass material goods, wealth and land was what he was expected to do, and that his true allegiance was to his family. That view changes and instead he advocates disregarding the things of the earth unless they help to serve God. "I should use these things to the extent that they help me toward my end, and rid myself of them to the extent that they hinder me."<sup>66</sup> The Ignatian model of progress is utilitarian in this way. To use only what is needed is the most efficient way of proceeding towards any goal. As a leader Ignatius was lauded for his pragmatism. At times this pragmatism seemed to contradict his spirituality, but here in the text of the *Spiritual Exercises* he insists on his spiritual dedication.

The structure and style of the *Spiritual Exercises* are also unique. Nowhere in the text does he mention himself or directly reference his story. This is interesting considering we know that it was his own experience that inspired the text and that he used his personal notes to craft it. Both the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Autobiography* were published during Ignatius' lifetime. The *Autobiography* was very successful and, because it was a personal account, its message was all the more compelling. It attracted many new members to the Order of Jesuits as inspired by Ignatius' transformation. Why, then, are the *Spiritual Exercises* void of his own narrative and commentary? When Ignatius was in bed recovering from his injury, he read books about the lives of saints and

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<sup>66</sup> Ganss, 130.

drew immense inspiration from them. It is interesting that he chooses an entirely different writing model than the ones that inspired him the most.

Here we must remember a point that is often forgotten. Ignatius wrote the *Spiritual Exercises* but da Camara wrote the *Autobiography*. These are the two most prominent Ignatian works, but they cannot be compared exactly because of their differing authorship. Da Camara crafted Ignatius' biography in his own vision and style and was surely imbued with some of da Camara's agenda to grow the Society of Jesus. Ignatius' own style is much different. Perhaps it was shaped by stunted education in his youth, but Ganss describes his writing as "often difficult, complicated, succinct and sometimes elliptical, and long known for its Spartan terseness."<sup>67</sup> The *Spiritual Exercises* exemplify this style. The text is arranged in a rigid, formulaic way and motivates the reader through direct step-by-step instructions instead of inspiring the reader with narrative or spiritual ruminations.

Some argue that the rigidity of the *Spiritual Exercises* is a manifestation of the indelible guilt Ignatius felt for his past sins and the extreme measures he went through to try to cleanse himself. While in Manresa, Ignatius entered some of his darkest times. He was so overcome with despair and disgust for his past that at one point he contemplated suicide.<sup>68</sup> He also subjected himself to long fasts and self-flagellation. "Thus he began to look for some spiritual men who could cure him of these scruples, but nothing helped him."<sup>69</sup> After months of torment, his suffering was eventually eased by another vision from God, and only then was he able to continue forth on his spiritual path. "He thus

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<sup>67</sup> Ganss, 59.

<sup>68</sup> Ganss, 78.

<sup>69</sup> Ganss, 77.

decided with great lucidity not to confess anything from the past anymore; and so from that day forward he remained free of those scruples and held it for certain that Our Lord had mercifully deigned to deliver him.”<sup>70</sup> Finally Ignatius was freed from the darkness of his past and could perform deeds in God’s service.

One of Ignatius’ goals from the start was to help souls. After the nightmare he experienced in Manresa, feeling overwhelmed with guilt and useless to God, Ignatius organized the *Spiritual Exercises* in a way so that no other person who wanted to serve the Lord would be kept from doing so, as he had felt he once was. By following the instructions and rules of the *Spiritual Exercises*, individuals could strengthen their spirituality and their resolve so that they may pursue a holy life unhindered by whatever self-doubt they might have. This perspective assumes the *Spiritual Exercises* were created for the service of others. Meissner says that it was just as much for him as it was for others.

Meissner likens the *Spiritual Exercises* to an abstraction of a self-portrait of Ignatius. He says, “It seems clear that the spiritual program of the pilgrim was nothing less than an assault on his own narcissism and self-love, which he saw as the impediment to his spiritual growth and conquest.”<sup>71</sup> Taking up this lens, we see more connections to Ignatius, especially in a meditation practice about “Three Classes of Persons.” In this exercise, the individual must contemplate his or her relationship to material goods. Each class of person described has a varying degree of attachment to wealth. “Persons Typical of the First Class would like to get rid of the attachment which they have for this acquired money, in order to find God in peace and be able to save their souls. But these persons do

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<sup>70</sup> Ganss, 79.

<sup>71</sup> Meissner, 101.

not take the means, even to the hour of death.”<sup>72</sup> Young Ignatius would likely have fallen into this category. In the tradition of his family, he then prized the quest for power and wealth above all else. The Loyola brand of Catholicism was fairly superficial. The family was devoted to God and the Church so long as that devotion did not hinder its upward mobility. Ignatius’ Second Class was an intermediary, well intentioned but ineffective. The Third Class is the acceptable category.

Persons Typical of the Third Class also desire to get rid of the attachment, but in such a way that they would have no inclination either to keep the acquired money or to dispose of it. Instead they desire to keep it or dispose of it solely according to what God our Lord will move their will to choose, and also according to what they themselves will judge to be better for the service and praise of his Divine Majesty.<sup>73</sup>

In meditation on The Three Classes Ignatius describes the place attachment to wealth should have in the life of a good Catholic. In his earlier days he would have fit into the first category, grouped with those whose desire for wealth prohibits them from serving God righteously. The third category is the one that describes the ideal person, but the description may be surprising. One might have expected Ignatius’ ideal class of persons to be those who abandon all wealth on their own volition and adopts a life of poverty, but this is not the case. Ignatius might have criticized this kind for acting too much on their own agenda, too much according to their own will, because above all else he taught that obedience to God’s will comes first. If God wishes for an individual to

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<sup>72</sup> Ganss, 157.

<sup>73</sup> Ganss, 157.

keep or seek wealth, in his view, it is acceptable and required to do so. Obedience to God, the Church, and to the advancement of God's glory is a mainstay of Ignatian spirituality.

The *Spiritual Exercises* raise countless questions about Ignatius' approach toward practicing the Catholic faith. What is particularly interesting is how it pairs with the *Autobiography* as the two most important texts leading up to the founding of the Society of Jesus. The two have different authors and completely different structures. The *Spiritual Exercises* are not meant simply to be read; they should be practiced. Together they demonstrate the breadth of Ignatius' transformation. One teaches the sins of his past and the other teaches the virtues of his post-conversion life. If we were to arrange the acts of Ignatius on a spectrum, they would literally run the gamut from sinful to saintly.

### *Conclusions*

An examination of Ignatius of Loyola's early days while his beliefs were still being formed reveals a fascinating figure of sixteenth-century Christianity. Even before the founding of the Society of Jesus and before he became known as the father of the Jesuits, Ignatius was living a very interesting life, making a path all his own. His story speaks to the power of transformation that can take place within an individual. Since Ignatius' transformation was spiritually motivated, we must ask what his story says about the Catholic faith at the time. Ignatius is really a symbol of spiritual rebirth. The *Autobiography* is essentially an account of his spiritual life beginning at its infancy with his conversion experience followed by the gradual maturation of his beliefs and practices into adulthood, culminating in his foundation of the Society of Jesus and role as the father of the Jesuits. After his intense penance in Manresa, he said to himself, "What new life is

this that we are now beginning?”<sup>74</sup> After his spiritual rebirth he is no longer alone. He experiences the start of his new life with God, hence the “we” in that sentence.

Ignatius’ story is uniquely Catholic because of the role in it of confession and the forgiveness of sins. In his youth he perpetrated sinful acts with little concern for consequences or morality. He was a far cry from a saint. Yet through an intense conversion experience and a subsequent purgation of the sins of his past, he was able to reinvent himself as a spiritual pilgrim and a soldier for God. He sought to do right by God and vowed himself to his service, and he never waivered in this mission until death. Ignatius is a poster child for the Catholic faith’s capacity for the forgiveness of sins. Ignatius had many flaws and through penance and prayer he transformed into a new man with a renewed passion for life. Those who read his story and who followed his steps through the *Spiritual Exercise* could take comfort in believing that they too could find faith in God and find purpose in his service.

If Ignatius’ life can be interpreted as a story of Catholic values, it is important to question whether or not those who wrote about him intended it to be read that way. There is much literature surrounding Ignatius by many authors over many decades. Those works present their own set of historiographical problems. The first complications regard the reliability of his contemporaries. His peers knew him as a kind man but an uncompromising and sometimes harsh leader. Meissner writes, “Early on, moreover, his Jesuit contemporaries began to speak and write of him with a reverence that rendered edifying his every act, making it particularly difficult for later historians to find the man

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<sup>74</sup> Ganss, 77.

behind the hagiographical veil.”<sup>75</sup> Either these men were so awestruck by Ignatius’ aura of infallibility or they were intimidated and would never criticize their leader. It is difficult to ascertain whether or not their accounts of Ignatius are overly complimentary or constructed to suggest a certain spiritual narrative.

Many further factors contribute to this veil over Ignatius. For example, the high volume of materials regarding early Jesuit history has been an obstacle for historians. Archives include over 150,000 Jesuit publications since 1540.<sup>76</sup> Yet in this vast collection, the majority of writings are on either Ignatius or a select few of his peers. Critic Peter Kountz says, “It is no wonder, then, that the Jesuits are so often misunderstood and misrepresented.”<sup>77</sup> In reality, we have a relatively narrow view of the profile of a Jesuit. The few that are most remembered are the most bold and controversial, like Ignatius himself. Over the years, this selective view has created a stereotype that all Jesuits were characteristically audacious trailblazers. Martin writes about the Jesuit mystique and the mythology surrounding the order, and about the Society’s silent majority.<sup>78</sup> The character of the majority is largely unaccounted for, leaving that much more room in the history books for Ignatius. Perhaps historians have given Ignatius an inordinate amount of attention, making him into a mythological figure. If we prescribe to that interpretation, then we may idealize Ignatius in ways discordant with historical fact.

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<sup>75</sup> Meissner, 375.

<sup>76</sup> Maurice Whitehead, “To Provide for the Edifice of Learning: Researching 450 Years of Jesuit Educational and Cultural History,” *History of Education* 36 (2007): 130.

<sup>77</sup> Kountz, 470.

<sup>78</sup> Martin, 37.

This study has largely made use of two main sources of modern commentary aside from the primary materials: Meissner's *Ignatius of Loyola* and O'Malley's *The First Jesuits*. Kountz compares the two major works and is complimentary to both. A fault of Meissner's biography, however, is its reliance on the psychoanalytic lens. Meissner is both a Jesuit historian and a licensed psychoanalyst, but the intersection between the two poses its problems. As Kountz notes, "Father Meissner falls into the trap of the 'in-house' language of psychoanalysts and, unfortunately, this can be perceived as off-putting jargon."<sup>79</sup> Meissner's work delves into details and motivations while O'Malley's covers historical context. Kountz further points out, these two works, "taken together, must be seen as a major first step on remedying such an extraordinary deficiency."<sup>80</sup> Comprehensive studies of this type are a new venture for historians, and considering the fact that a Jesuit pope sits in the Vatican it is hopeful and likely that interest in Ignatius will continue.

A crucial question to summarize this study is the extent to which the life of Ignatius of Loyola connected to the path of the Jesuits up to modern day. Much of this study is dedicated to the changes he went through, but we must now ask what has remained constant throughout the centuries. The most important Ignatian characteristic is adaptability. It is equally apparent in the events of his life and the history of the Jesuit order. Ignatius was a master chameleon, adjusting to his surroundings no matter how much they differed. He was a warrior on the Basque battlefields, a gentleman in the Castilian courts, a beggar in Manresa, a student in Paris, and a General in the Vatican.

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<sup>79</sup> Kountz, 472.

<sup>80</sup> Kountz, 470.

His willingness to change demonstrates his remarkable dedication to the service of God. He would go anywhere and do anything so long as it would add to the glory of God.

The staying power of the Society of Jesus can be attributed to this same adaptability. Since the sixteenth century the Catholic Church has survived periods of immense pressure and transformation. Kountz acknowledges the Jesuits' efforts to "remain flexible and improvisatory with respect to the realities of contemporary culture and cultural more, to the practice of religion, and to the articulation of a theology and spirituality that are, above all, relevant to the world in which they are grounded."<sup>81</sup> Jesuits today can be found in distant locales all around the world. Shore notices the same flexibility. He observes the Jesuit's ability to respond to issues with a "careful redefinition of its position."<sup>82</sup> Sometimes the Catholic church is criticized as being too bogged down in tradition and restricted by arcane reasoning, but in contrast, Ignatius and his order are remembered for their adaptability and pragmatism.

In the infancy of his papacy, Pope Francis the Jesuit is already showing similarities to Saint Ignatius. He was labeled as a bold personality the moment he announced his choice of papal name. While Ignatius had a lame leg, Pope Francis has one lung. These comparisons are superficial, but we can be sure that research connecting the two will develop over the coming years. It is too early to tell right now, but decades from now it will be interesting to see how the study of Pope Francis as a Jesuit alters our perception of Saint Ignatius. Thus is the object of the modern historical discipline: to constantly evaluate how our knowledge of things and people of the past can be altered by realities of the present.

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<sup>81</sup> Kountz, 469.

<sup>82</sup> Shore, 317.

